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## Youth Service Bureau helps families reclaim lives

By Tom Lochner  
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**RICHMOND** - Annie Garrison's grandson was having problems in school. Caring for him and three other grandchildren consumed virtually all her time and energy.

Two years later, Garrison's now 14-year-old grandson gets mentoring. He and his siblings -- a sister, 16, and brothers, 11 and 10 -- go on field trips, get academic help and learn to use computers. Garrison, 65 and retired, gets an occasional afternoon off.

"That way, I can get a rest period while the kids enjoy themselves and I enjoy myself at home, relaxing," said Garrison, who is sole caregiver for her four grandchildren.

She owes the turn of fate to the West Contra Costa Youth Service Bureau, a family-centered social service agency that will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year.

The agency started out working with teenagers on probation, doing case management as well as crisis intervention. It also helped the teens get re-enrolled in school, find jobs and referred them to counseling, said clinical director Onna Alexander.

Two years ago, the agency added mental health therapy for children ages 7 to 18 to its menu.

"Some of the youths coming to us are victims of sexual abuse, or neglect," Alexander said, "or they may have other issues that may have a profound impact on them, and no one's addressed those issues, no one's seen them, and they've been dealing with that on their own. The schools can't do it all."

The mental health services are part of what the agency calls the Wraparound Program, which provides a bundle of social services with the goal of improving family life for children as well as adults.

Four years ago, the agency took over and renovated a building at Broadway and Carlson Boulevard in Richmond that was a squat for homeless people after previous incarnations as an industrial office and an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting place. A triangular yard with a lawn and covered deck provides a venue for outdoor activities.

The agency serves about 530 families, said executive director Taalia Hasan.

The 2003-04 budget of almost \$1 million consists of a blend of federal, state and county funds.

Garrison avails herself of the Kinship Care Program, which provides support services to relative caregivers, including respite care.

"Everyone there has been really, really nice to me," Garrison said. "I really don't know what

I would do if I didn't have them. I don't have a husband," Garrison said.

"They've helped my grandson a lot," she said. "They teach him to be a man. His daddy is out of the picture, so he doesn't get a lot of man power."

Every Tuesday, Garrison's 14-year-old grandson takes part in the agency's Independent Living Skills Program, where two male facilitators teach boys life skills, such as how to budget money, achieve academic success and act responsibly in relationships.

"So many of our youngsters are in female-headed households," Alexander said.

With the state mired in financial problems, Alexander is bracing herself for hard times.

"We are on pins and needles," Alexander said. "Any nonprofit, and even the county agencies that provide mental health services, are concerned. No one knows what their cuts are going to be."

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